

Chairman Smith Hails 12% Funding Increase For Veterans As A Breakthrough Budget Increase

Budget Committee Agrees to Increase Veterans= Funding By \$1 Billion More Than the New Administration's Budget Proposal

(Washington, DC) - After a two-month, full-court press by the Committee on Veterans= Affairs for increased funding of veterans= services, the Chairman, Chris Smith of New Jersey, today hailed the decision of the Budget Committee to increase funding by 12% for the Department of Veterans= Affairs, up \$5.6 billion over last year B including \$1 billion more than the Bush Administration's budget proposal B calling it a breakthrough budget increase.®

AI have said all along that the Bush budget was a work in progress B and that we would do more,® Smith said. AToday's stunning 12% increase in funding is a small price to pay compared to the personal sacrifices made by the men and women who have protected our nation, in peace and in war, and whose lives have forever been changed by their experiences,® said Smith. AThis victory is a victory for all veterans, especially those who continue to suffer from the disabling effects of war wounds or from lingering mental illnesses connected to their service. They answered the call and now we must do the same,® Smith said.

ASince the first days of the 107th Congress, we have relentlessly made the case for increasing funding of veterans= services in light of unconscionable underfunding by the Clinton Administration which has exacerbated delays endured by veterans waiting for medical appointments or adjudication of compensation claims,® said Smith. AToday's decision by the Budget Committee to increase funding for the Department of Veterans= Affairs by a whopping \$5.6 billion B which adds a billion dollars on top of the Administration's proposal B is a breakthrough budget increase that finally begins to address the VA's backlog, as well as provide funding to cover vital unmet services for the men and women who have so bravely worn the uniform in defense of our freedom,® he said.

Last month, the Veterans= Affairs Committee in a unanimous and bipartisan vote, backed Chairman Smith's recommendation that funding for the Department be increased by \$2.4 billion above the prior year's outlays, up to approximately \$53 billion. Today's action by the Budget Committee providing a 12% increase over last years mark allocates most of the funding recommended and endorsed by the entire Veterans= Affairs Committee.

AI am particularly gratified by the willingness of Chairman Nussle, the Speaker, Majority Leader and others in the leadership, to work with us on this budget,® said Smith. AIn the end, we were able to persuade them with the facts B the need is real, the obligation is sacred and the time is now,® he said.

Under the Budget Committee's resolution, the overall spending on veterans' services will rise by \$5.6 billion, a 12% increase from fiscal year 2001 spending. Record increases in spending for medical care will compensate for inflation, as well as allow for significant increases in spending on mental health care, long term care, additional staff to reduce waiting times, higher pharmacy costs, spinal cord injury care, homeless veteran transitional housing and emergency care. Additional funds will also be provided for research and construction, state nursing home and cemetery grants, veterans' benefits administration and national cemetery administration.

Working together, our committee has identified hundreds of very specific and well-justified areas within the Department's budget where targeted increases can make a substantial and immediate difference in the lives of veterans," said Smith. "We owe it not just to those who have already served, but also to the men and women who today are on the front lines in Korea, Bosnia, Guantanamo Bay and on bases and ships around the world, ready to risk their lives in defense of freedom. They must know with absolute certainty that promises made, will be promises kept," he said.

Smith also hailed the inclusion of additional funds to cover mandatory increases which will be necessitated upon approval of two bills he is proposing, including, H.R. 801, the Veterans' Opportunities Act, and H.R. 811, the Veterans Hospital Emergency Repair Act, which was marked up in a meeting of the Veterans' Affairs Committee today.

"I am particularly pleased to see that the Budget Committee has already committed specific funds in this year's budget to immediately implement H.R. 801, the Veterans' Opportunities Act," said Smith. "This legislation will provide overdue increases to cover the rising costs of many urgently needed veterans' services, such as adaptive automobile and housing grants for severely disabled veterans," he said.

Smith's legislation, H.R. 801, will also expand the Servicemembers Group Life Insurance program to include spouses and children, increase the maximum benefit from \$200,000 to \$250,000 and make it retroactive to October 1, 2000, in order to include those men and women who have recently lost their lives in tragic military accidents.

The Budget Committee also included funding to cover Chairman Smith's proposal to modernize the Montgomery G.I. Bill, which provides education benefits for servicemembers. Under the Chairman's proposal, expected to be unveiled next week, the monthly benefit will be increased to a level that allows a qualified recipient to cover the monthly costs of attending a state college as a commuter. (From \$650 to 1100 per month for each of 36 months.)

The Committee on Veterans' Affairs today also approved Smith's bill to provide immediate emergency funding to repair and rebuild dilapidated VA medical care facilities. The legislation, H.R. 811, will provide \$550 million over the next two years for the Department of Veterans' Affairs to immediately address urgent construction needs, specifically in facilities identified as having patient safety hazards, requiring seismic protection, or to improve privacy or accommodations for disabled veterans.